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Early Cabins in Iowa

A creaking, canvas-covered wagon slowly came to a halt as the oxen, tired from the long journey, ceased straining at the yoke. The driver looked about him at the expanse of prairie, unbroken except for the timber which fringed an occasional water course. Far behind lay his old home. Days before he had crossed the Mississippi, and leaving the busy river town had pushed westward until he had passed all signs of habitation and reached this virgin prairie. Nowhere was a sheltering roof to be seen except the covered wagon whose protection was given to the women and children. The only table upon which to partake of the plain meals of corn bread and bacon was the green earth.

But this sketch is not biographical; nor does it deal with the unique. All up and down the Iowa frontier this scene was being repeated. Sometimes a lonely wagon made its way to the edge of the unknown; sometimes a group of neighbors or related families made the venture together. In every case the pioneer's first thought was to prepare a home. It would be a dwelling place for his family, a fortress against the Indians, a nucleus for civilization. Under these conditions building the cabin came to be an event of great importance and produced a thrill of pleasure that could hardly be understood by those who had never suffered the same privations.

The first home was necessarily a simple affair. In the prairie country where wood was scarce and sod was plentiful, the easiest house to build was the sod shanty. The materials were procured by taking the breaking plow into the low land where the sod was heavy and plowing a furrow from sixteen to eighteen inches in width. This was cut into sections, eighteen to twenty inches long, which were then laid like brick. The roof was usually made of large rafters covered with prairie hay or grass and covered again with sod. Often the structure had a board floor, and usually one door and one window. It is surprising the amount of genius that could be expended in the construction of a sod shanty. For this reason, there was great difference in the appearance and arrangement of these cabins. Some had an air of comfort, convenience, and even neatness, which gave them a genuine homelike appearance. Others remained as they were at first — simply holes in the ground.

Even in the wooded districts finished lumber was not to be had and labor was dear. As a result the architecture of the home entered very little into the thoughts of the early settlers — it was shelter they wanted, and protection from the stress of weather. The settler had neither the money nor the mechanical appliances for building himself a modern house: he was content in most instances to have a mere cabin.

Of dwellings made of timber, perhaps the most

primitive were the "three faced" camps. These structures — sometimes called "cat faced" sheds or "wickeups"— consisted of three walls made of logs in their rough state—the fourth side being left open. The first settler in a community who had to build his cabin without assistance selected small logs that he could raise to the walls alone, but after neighbors came larger logs were used. Across these walls, poles were laid at a distance of about three feet apart, and on these was placed a roof of clapboards which were kept in position by weight-poles. The only floor in the camp was the earth, and the structure required neither door, window, nor chimney, for the open side answered all these purposes. Immediately in front of the cabin was built a huge log fire which served for warmth and for cooking purposes. These "three-faced camps", built apparently in a hurry to afford a resting place for a family without a home, were temporary in most cases and were soon supplanted by more complete dwelling places.

The claim cabins proper, which followed these first buildings, required some help and a good deal of labor to build. House raisings were frequent and became social as well as industrial events. After the logs had been cut into the desired length according to the dimensions of the house, they were dragged to the building place by horses. The neighbors were then called upon to assist. Four men were selected to "carry up the corners", and

the work began. As the logs were lifted up a "saddle" was hewn upon the top of one log and a notch cut in the underside of the next to fit upon the saddle. By cutting the notches in the larger end of the log a little deeper and alternating the butt and top ends the walls of the cabin were carried up approximately level. At first the logs were put together with the bark on. As the idea of decoration and elegance increased a place was chipped along two sides of each log. Finally the inside and outside of the cabin walls were hewn so as to present a flat surface.

When the house-walls had reached a height of seven or eight feet, two gables were formed by shortening the logs gradually at each end of the building near the top, and fastening each log to the one below or to the roof logs. The roof was made by laying very straight small logs or stout poles from gable to gable at regular intervals and on these were fastened the clapboards very much in the same manner as modern shingles, only with fewer courses, as the clapboards were perhaps four feet long and generally about two and a half feet to the weather. Weight poles were laid over the whole and were secured by long wooden pins, driven into auger holes, which kept them from slipping down toward the lower edge of the roof.

When this sheltering roof was completed the small cracks between the wall logs were stopped with "chinking". The spaces were filled in with split

sticks of wood, called "chinks", and then daubed over, both inside and outside, with mortar made of clay which had straw or hay mixed with it to keep it from crumbling and falling out. In this way the cabin was made comfortably warm during the long cold winter.

Sometimes an opening was left for a door when the logs were laid, but usually the door space was made by cutting an aperture of the required size in one side of the room. The doorway was not always provided immediately with a door, but instead the most simple contrivances that would serve the purpose were brought into requisition. In some cases a quilt, blanket, or skin was spared for the purpose of guarding the entrance. There is an instance in which a table is said to have served as a door also, being taken down and used for a table, and rehung as a door after meals. As soon as convenient a shutter of some kind was provided. Sometimes this was a thatched frame work, but more often it consisted of two large clapboards or puncheons, pinned together with cross pieces and wooden pins. The door was hung on wooden hinges and held shut by a wooden catch. Through a hole above the latch a buckskin thong passed which when pulled lifted the wooden bar thus allowing the door to open. For security at night this latch string could be drawn in, hence, as an expression of welcome, there arose the saying: "The latch string is always hanging out".

Frequently there was no window at first. Later

when duties became less pressing, a hole about two feet long was cut out of one of the wall logs. Whenever possible the window was on the south side and could be left open during the summer at least. Greased or oiled paper pasted over sticks crossed in the shape of a sash was often used as a substitute for window glass. It admitted the light and excluded the air, but of course lacked the transparency. Even greased deer hide was sometimes used.

The chimney of the western pioneer's cabin was not built of stone or brick, but in most cases of split sticks of wood and mortar made of clay. Space was provided by leaving in the original building a large open place in the wall, or more often perhaps, by cutting one after the structure was up. The fireplace — at least six feet wide and frequently of such dimensions as to occupy nearly the whole width of the house — was constructed in this opening. It was planked on the outside by butts of wood notched together to stay it. The back and sides were built of stone, of wood lined with stone, or of stone and earth, the stone-work facing into the room. A large flat rock in front of it, called a hearth stone, was placed level with the floor to protect the puncheons from brands that might roll out of the fire. For a chimney, or flue, any contrivance that would conduct the smoke upward would do. Some flues consisted of squares of sod, laid as a mason lays a wall of bricks and plastered on the inside with clay. Perhaps the more common type was that known as the

“cat and clay” chimney. It was built of small split sticks, two and a half or three feet in length, carried a little distance above the roof, and plastered, both inside and outside, with a thick covering of clay. Built as they were the burning of a chimney was a frequent occurrence in cold weather.

Other accessories were added as soon as possible. The clay which had previously served as a floor and which had been beaten hard and smooth by this time was overlaid with a “puncheon” floor consisting of slabs hewn from logs. After the floor was laid the upper surface would be smoothed off with an adz. As a final touch of elegance a few more logs were sometimes put on the building making an upstairs or loft which was reached by a ladder secured to the wall. Other families built a better roof or an additional room.

During all of this building process there was ordinarily no sound of hammering of nails or rasping of the saw, only the dull thud of the ax. The pioneer was often forced to build his cabin without nails, screws, bolts, bars, or iron of any description. Wooden pegs were hewn from the logs; the hinges and even the catch for the door were wooden.

The living room was of good size, for usually it served the purpose of kitchen, bedroom, parlor, and arsenal. In other words the loom, spinning wheel, chairs, beds, cooking utensils, and other furniture were all arranged as snugly as possible in this one room. With an ax and an auger the pioneer met all

pressing needs. The furniture varied in proportion to the ingenuity of the occupants, except in the rare instances where settlers brought with them their old household supply.

The articles used in the kitchen were few and simple. Lacking the convenience of a cook stove, the work was done in and about the big fireplace. The utensils of a well furnished kitchen included an iron pot, a long-handled frying pan, a skillet, and sometimes a coffee pot. Often a later improvement was found in the shape of an iron crane swinging from the side of the chimney and carrying on its "pot hook" the kettles or iron pots used in cooking.

Sometimes a mantel shelf was made by placing clapboards across strong wooden pins fitted into holes bored in the wall logs. This shelf might hold kitchen or table-ware, the candlestick with its deer tallow candle and possibly an old clock. If the family were lucky enough to have an abundance of table-ware, a series of shelves with perhaps a cheap cotton cloth as a curtain might be built for a china closet.

The necessity of finding a more convenient and comfortable place than the ground upon which to sleep, produced the "prairie bunk". This "one-legged" bedstead, now a piece of furniture of the past, was improvised by the pioneer in a unique manner. A forked stake was driven into the ground at a proper distance from the corner of the room and upon it poles, usually of hickory, were laid

reaching from each wall. These poles where they touched the walls rested in the openings between the logs or were driven into auger holes. Upon these poles slats of clapboard were placed, or linden bark was interwoven from pole to pole. Sometimes an old fashioned "cord bed" was made by using basswood bark for the cord. On this framework the housewife spread her straw tick, or piled the luxurious mound of her home-made feather bed. Such a sleeping place was usually known as a "prairie bedstead", but sometimes it was called a "prairie rascal".

Beds of this sort, however, were for the grown-ups. Children were stowed away for the night either in low, dark attics, among the horns of elk and deer, or in trundle beds which would slip under the larger bedstead in the daytime.

It was easy enough to improvise tables, bureaus, and chairs. Often a packing box answered the purposes of the first two, while smaller boxes of the same kind served as chairs. Real chairs were seldom seen in the early cabins; but in their place long benches and stools were made out of hewn planks. These stools were often three-legged because of the difficulty of making four legs so that all would touch the uneven floor at the same time. The benches were but hewn slabs with a couple of stakes driven slantingly into each end on the under side; and the tables, in some instances were simply larger and higher benches.

In one corner were the loom and other implements used in the manufacture of clothing; while the clothing itself was suspended from pegs driven in the logs. As there was no storehouse, fitches of bacon and rings of dried pumpkin were suspended from the rafters. Over the door was usually hung the rifle and with it the powder-horn and hunting pouch. Luxuries were rare even among well to do people and seldom was there so much as a strip of rag carpet on their floors although they might have large tracts of land, numerous head of stock and many bushels of corn.

Occasionally one found on the frontier a cabin with more complete and comfortable furnishings. Mrs. Semira A. Phillips describes as follows her uncle's cabin in Mahaska County:

Their cabin had but one room, but that room was larger than cabins generally were. I think now it was eighteen feet wide and twenty feet long. I know they had in it four ordinary sized beds, and a trundle-bed which was kept under one of the big beds in the daytime and drawn out at night for the children. The style of bedstead used then was so high from the floor to the bed rail that there was ample room under a bed to store many trunks and chests and boxes and bundles. It was customary to hang a valance around which hid all these unsightly things. Women in that day and stage of the country's history learned how to manage and utilize room. My uncle's cabin had a very large fire-place, six feet wide at least. That fire-place was built up, back and jambs with stone and mud. The top of the chimney was of mud and split staves or sticks. The

floor was puncheon and the roof clap-boards. There was a door in the south, a small window in the west end by the fire-place, and another small window in the north. My aunt had a loom and all other necessities for making cloth. While the weather was warm the loom was kept in a shed at the back of the house. That shed had a clap-board roof, and the floor was of elm tree bark laid flat on the ground with the rough side up. My uncle and aunt were both good managers and could make the best of their crude surroundings.

Another account tells of a big cabin with a single immense room below, with whitewashed walls and carefully scrubbed puncheon floor, and a room above for sleeping purposes. An interesting feature of this home is described as follows:

A little way from that big log house was another of less pretensions which was used as a kitchen and dining-room. There was a big wide fireplace with crane and hooks and a long table covered with a snowy cloth.

It is interesting to note that the first three United States Senators from Iowa spent part of their lives in log cabins. George W. Jones came out to Sinsinawa Mound in what is now southwestern Wisconsin in 1827. Returning the next spring, he slept under his wagon one night and the next morning set the ten or twelve men whom he had hired, at work chopping down trees. Two days later he slept in the log cabin that had been completed in that time. He carried up two corners of the house himself —

the first manual labor he had ever done. The cabin was forty-nine by seventeen feet, having an entry of fifteen by seventeen feet. Each room had one door and one window only. The flooring was of planks brought from St. Genevieve, Missouri. When Augustus Caesar Dodge was a boy the Dodge family lived for eight years in a rude log cabin. This home was built entirely from hewn timbers, without a particle of sawed lumber, and was equipped with a puncheon floor and a clapboard roof.

James Harlan, the third United States Senator from Iowa, has given us a description of his boyhood home in Indiana and the account is typical of the methods of house building throughout the Middle West. Their first cabin was made largely from a single tree. The trunk of this tree was five or six feet in diameter, and when the tree was felled, served as the back of the "camp". A few feet in front two forked branches were driven into the ground, a beam placed across the forks, and smaller poles were laid from this beam to the trunk of the tree. This structure was then covered with strips of bark, several feet in length, overlapping like shingles, and the sides were hung with bed-clothing. This makeshift was replaced in about a week by the more typical log cabin. This must have been a busy week for in that time the father of Harlan had not only collected the materials from the forest and with the assistance of six neighbors raised the walls; but he had completed the further tasks of chinking the logs,

building the fireplace, and constructing a stairway to the loft.

When Robert Lucas, first Governor of the Territory of Iowa, visited Iowa City in 1839, the most commodious cabin in the town served as his headquarters. It boasted of an attic for a lodging room, and into this loft one must climb, by means of a primitive ladder, through a very small opening in the upper floor.

Among the historic cabins of Iowa which are still existing, that of Antoine Le Claire is perhaps the most memorable because of the events that transpired there. At the signing of the treaty with the Sac Indians in 1832, the section of land on which the treaty was signed was set aside and given to Le Claire on condition that he build his home thereon. Soon after, while there still was no city of Davenport, Le Claire erected what was then a most pretentious home. The house was built of hewn logs, boarded over. It was a story and a half high with three gables. To-day the house stands at the rear of 420 West Fifth Street in Davenport. After it was moved, a second story was added and the roof replaced. This building might not be recognized as a log cabin but for the fact that here and there the siding has been torn off revealing the logs of the first story.

The old log cabins of the early settlers in Iowa have now all but disappeared. They have been replaced by less picturesque though more practical

dwelling. Once in a while a vacated cabin is to be found among the trees along the river or on the sheltered slope of a prairie hill. In some cases, the old houses are still seen among the farm buildings, somewhat away from the present house and now used as summer kitchens or work shops. Others, after three quarters of a century, are still occupied — standing as a mute testimony of work well done.

MILDRED J. SHARP